Chinese street pop and performing with the urban environment

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Abstract

The urban environment is more than simply a setting that contains the regular pop shows found in various public spots in the city of Wuhan in China. Instead, the performances are formed from the sounds and other material conditions of their situation. Their sustainability as sources of income for performers and organisers, I argue, relies on a synergy between the acoustic qualities of the music and the wider sound environment, including in senses that draw upon the particular physical geography of this river city. Zooming in to look at individual street performance venues reveals also that different layouts are associated with characteristic patterns of audience behaviour, and there are links between these patterns and contrasting modes of social engagement. These modes, in turn, are significant in how singers negotiate legitimacy in their identities as performers, with different material circumstances and wider cultural perceptions of street performing in China shaping the struggles and successes of the group whose fortunes I follow in this article.

Introduction

An appeal for "lots of support, lots of encouragement" echoes off the high-rise apartment buildings surrounding a small public square in the city of Wuhan in central China. The young woman on the microphone is working hard to gather and engage an audience before she begins her first song at this evening's informal street performance. Already, a few dozen people are gathered loosely in a circle around her notional stage, but many more go about

their business in the square; a woman powerwalking in gym clothes puts her fingers in her ears as she passes one of the sound system's speakers, and a man trying to ride a motor scooter across the packed plaza leans on the bike's horn as he comes face to face with a cluster of spectators reluctant to part for him. Hanging between two trees is a stretch of red cloth that acts as a visual but not an aural barrier to the busy road only a few steps away on one side. When the singer begins a classic pop song from 1987 called "Wunai de sixu" (Helpless Mood), the ambient sound around the square and the heavy reverb coming through the speakers mask the details of her singing. Unusually tonight, though, I can hardly hear the backing track, which is playing through a smart phone connected to the PA system, and I remark to an off-stage singer watching beside me that something seems to be wrong with the technology. She replies that, in fact, the music is not as loud as usual because the event organisers have been warned to keep it down by the police, responding to complaints from local residents (anonymous, personal communication, 19 October 2014).

I am interested in how these performances are formed in immediate ways from the sounds and material conditions of the urban environment, and how they are part of the everyday activity of these locations. The urban environment is more than a setting that contains these musical performances (Born 2013: 20–1), but rather the two are constituent of each other and of various wider issues. I ask how aspects of these practices most obviously hinging on material phenomena (including sound) are significant in fostering the kinds of sociability that sustain the events, and how they can be decisive in the fortunes of performers and show organisers. I argue that there is a synergy between the acoustic qualities of the music and the sound environment of the wider city, including in senses that draw upon the particular physical geography of Wuhan. Also zooming in to look at individual performance venues reveals that characteristic patterns of audience behaviour are associated with different layouts, and there are links between these patterns and different modes of social engagement. The

links feed into the struggles and successes of performers as they strive to make a living from the shows, and I explore this through the article by following the fortunes of one group that is forced to change its performance location. Drawing together many of these issues is a theme of legitimacy in singers' identities as performers within these different material circumstances, and this discussion also connects the case study to a wider cultural dimension involving perceptions of street performing in China. This article, then, is less about an abstract sense of place – how, for instance, these musical practices are implicated in construction of the idea of Wuhan as a city – or about the politics of changing power dynamics in its public space. Instead, my focus is an immediate one, involving the concrete ways in which people and things in and around the performances relate so as to construct the particularities of a performance occasion.

The discussion is based on my attendance at more than 50 of these street performances in around a dozen locations during 2014, participating as an audience member, sometimes joining the giving of monetary gifts to performers (see Horlor 2019: 24–6), engaging in interactions and conversations with singers, audience members and musicians at the shows, and also over dinners, in online chats, and in other social settings away from the performances. I also surveyed the locations of more than 100 other instances of street music in the city – including square dancing, street karaoke stands, busking, and leisure instrumental musicians and groups – focusing particularly on different ways in which I found these forms to be embedded in their environments.

Street performances in Wuhan

During sessions lasting for a few hours each afternoon and evening in several spots around the city, a handful of singers take the stage in rotation to perform well-known Chinese popular songs with a small supporting cast of backing musicians, organisers, and helpers.

Their activity would resemble that of buskers (a kind of musician also not unknown in Wuhan) were it not, in part, for the presence of a core audience of dedicated spectators watching alongside a more dynamic flow of passers-by. The largest portion of audiences is made up of middle-aged or older men, and the shows are organised primarily with the aim of attracting cash tips from a minority who engage extensively with the performers and become their regular benefactors. Singers make a living through developing personal relationships with these individuals, and cash offerings are one manifestation of various forms of ongoing reciprocal exchange involving small and larger gifts, attention, and company (Horlor 2019).

Having spent time in more than 45 Chinese cities since 2007 (including substantial stays of up to a year in four of them) and kept a casual and more systematic eye on public-space music at different times during the period, my impression is that this kind of show is unusual in the wider national context. Participants, too, told me they suspected some features to be peculiar to Wuhan, this provincial capital of around ten million residents (Horlor 2019: 6). In particular, nowhere else in the country have I yet encountered or heard about any form with quite the same centrality of money-giving; the individual tips handed over in highly visible forms during almost every song on the streets here are more commonly counted in the hundreds or even thousands of *yuan* (the higher end breaking into the hundreds of US dollars) than in amounts usually offered to buskers and others, in the region of 5 or 10 *yuan* (around 1 or 2 dollars). Participants tell me that the sums grew gradually after musicians from Wuhan brought the idea for this kind of event back from Fujian province, where it originated as an offshoot of the popularisation of karaoke in the 1990s and subsequently faded (Horlor 2019: 6). As much as the development of a modern pop music industry and canon in China from the 1980s onwards (Jones 1991; Efird 2001; Baranovitch 2003), these shows are linked to a concurrent wider liberalisation of grassroots and communally organised leisure in the country

after several decades of political restrictions (Davis 1995; Shue 1995; White, Howell and Shang 1996).

Scholars have remarked on an inclination among people in Chinese societies to spend leisure time in public places (Yun 2004), although an increasing prevalence of home-based and media-reliant activities has been noted recently (Xiao 1997: 363; Wei and Stodolska 2015). In the Wuhan of 2014, there is still a range of musical leisure activity on street corners and in parks, including individuals and groups of amateurs practising instruments, opera performances put on for retired citizens, and small karaoke stands charging passers-by to take the microphone for a song or two. While there is some academic work about street performances in Chinese contexts (Zeng 2002; Wang 2004; Chan 2005; Jiao 2005; Lee 2009; Qing 2013; Wong 2016), and while limited attention has been paid to street music in Wuhan itself in the academic and popular press (Jiang 2003; Yang 2006), English-language scholarship that examines places of public-space performance has emerged more commonly from other geographic contexts such as the US (Harrison-Pepper [1990] 2010; Sakakeeny 2010) and the UK (Bywater 2006; Simpson 2011).

Some participants know this kind of event as *jiqing guangchang*, the phrase literally translated as "passion square." The name hints at the fervour and excitement organisers would like the performances to generate, and at cultural territory shared with square dancing (*guangchang wu*). The latter is a leisure phenomenon common throughout China's cities and sees groups of (mainly older) residents dance to recorded tracks for exercise and enjoyment in *guangchang* (squares or plazas) and similar public spaces. Square dancing has become increasingly controversial in China in recent years, with the sound pollution that some see as its major drawback becoming a focus for public debate (Wang 2015; Seetoo and Zou 2016). Examples of conflict between dancers and residents have been reported in Wuhan's local media and beyond, one of the most extreme in the city involving a group claiming that faeces

had been thrown down at them by angry residents from a window in a neighbouring tower block (CCTV 2013a).

People and things in musical performances

The emplaced nature of social experiences is, of course, a central concern in disciplines beyond music, not least geography. At the heart of a body of work on music by geographers from the last 20 years is the idea that space and musical activity can be mutually formative and that musical practices are implicated in the wider experience of space and place (Leyshon *et al*. 1998: 4). It asks, for instance, how music is involved in everyday perceptions of place (Connell and Gibson 2003; Revill 2016), in conveying environmental experiences (Kong 1995), and in identities of the local (Boland 2010). The single most prominent reference point for these geographers is non-representational theory, which stems from the work of Nigel Thrift (2008). Non-representational theory has, in fact, become a "catch-all term for a heterodox range of approaches emphasizing material process and practice" (Saldanha 2005: 708), a common thread being the balance in attention given to people and *things* when seeking to understand social happenings. The unfolding of a strip of activity is characterised as involving assemblages and flows that cannot be fully accounted for by considering the intentions of central human players and the discourses that circulate around them (Thrift 2008: 9). Rolland Munro illustrates this using the example of the speed bump, the strip of raised tarmac meant to slow cars on a road. He observes that some drivers, when forced to reduce their speed for this obstacle, take the opportunity to stop and wave waiting pedestrians across the road. Negotiating physical circumstances shapes the interaction between people here; the relationship between the gradient of the road surface in combination with capabilities of the car contributes to a social effect, the driver's courteous gesture to the pedestrian. This

consequence could not be fully understood simply by considering the driver's original intention (Munro 2009: 128).

Geographers of this period have been at pains to highlight non-representational theory's contributions to re-evaluating the study of music so that it becomes not only about products and texts but also embodied doings (Saldanha 2005: 708; Wood 2012: 199). Ethnomusicologists (in the Anglophone sphere at least), owing much to the anthropological approaches of influential scholars such as David McAllester (1954) and Alan Merriam (1977), may already have been embracing much of this lesson for well over half a century. But where I see the orientations of geographers as most complementary to the ways music's materiality tends to be considered in current ethnomusicology is through the specific and direct focus on *performance* (Saldanha 2005; Simpson 2011, 2012). Curiously perhaps, much of the best-known recent work on the role of *things* in music from ethnomusicologists has looked less at the space and material of performance than at various facets of wider musical life, for instance flows of musical artefacts (Impey 2013; Steingo 2015), or the manufacture of musical instruments and their investment with symbolic significances (Bates 2012; Roda 2014). Studying street-music performances in the UK, however, the geographer Paul Simpson (2013) explores how the "vitality" to produce effects on the very unfolding of performance events is shown by a range of "operators" including non-human bodies, sounds, and atmospheric conditions. As part of an autoethnography of his busking experiences, for example, Simpson describes a session in which he struggles to command an audience. At one point, a seagull defecates close to him while he is playing; this scatters the passers-by who make up his potential crowd, and it serves as the final encouragement for him to bring the unsuccessful session to an end. It forces him to acknowledge how the bird's behaviour and that of the people around combine to form a more definitive influence over the scene than any of his own contributions in isolation (Simpson 2013: 191).

Where similar approaches have been harnessed by music scholars, they have tended to be with reference to the related approach of actor network theory, developed initially in the discipline of sociology. This is another way of expanding appraisals of a strip of social activity to take account of intersections between different kinds of operator involved, not only the people as "social" beings (Latour 1996, 2005). It has contributed particularly fruitfully to understandings of how musical instruments are part of wider experiences beyond the moments of literal performance. In Turkey, for instance, Eliot Bates analyses how people and physical tokens of the instrument the *saz* interrelate off the stage to generate social meanings around national identity (Bates 2012). And on a finer level of detail, Allen Roda talks of the dried grains of paste involved in the production and tuning of new *tabla* drums in Indian workshops. He advocates thinking of the grains as interlocking in a vibrating *network* that is ultimately involved in a socially meaningful consequence when a drum is produced to please people with its sound (Roda 2014: 368). Further work aligning itself with actor network theory (Prior 2008; Piekut 2014; McGraw 2016; Tucker 2016; Birenbaum Quintero 2018) sometimes has implications for understanding performance venues and spaces in these ways too, but rarely tackles this facet of musical life directly.

Work falling under a constellation of labels including "soundscape," "ecology," and "ecomusicology" is also highly relevant here. Much of it is united by looking at environments (in a general sense) as connected on the macroscopic level to musical cultures and sound organisation. Scholars have, for instance, appraised the political implications of the distribution of a city's characteristic sounds (Sakakeeny 2010; Hankins and Stevens 2014), examined how perception of sound environments works (Simonett 2014), investigated ways material environments are represented in sound (Guy 2009), or how they are present in the cultures and worldviews with which musical structures emerge (Widdess 2006; Ramnarine 2009; Rees 2016). The significant difference here, though, is my interest in the intimate scale

of performances as unique occasions, the direct and immediate consequences of material conditions for how musical performance unfolds, and their role in the combination of factors shaping meanings for people. In this context, it is about how those involved negotiate relationships with the things of which the performances are comprised, and how these relationships are linked to successes and failures in the performances (especially in terms of their financial sustainability in different circumstances).

This approach seems particularly well suited to the street context in Wuhan, since in these performances, organisers have little control over many aspects of the material realities through which performances play out, and musicians are not always the principal architects of the social situation. As I will explain, the locations street musicians find themselves performing in are often less than ideal, the shows are open to the unpredictable influence of wider street activity, and they depend for their very viability upon a number of interlinked contingencies beyond the immediate command of those involved. Where my emphasis may diverge from the approaches from geography just mentioned, however, is in mainly considering enduring features of the urban environment, as opposed to specific acts with more short-lived consequences. To emphasise the lasting nature of these relationships, I talk more in this article of material "conditions" from which musical performance can emerge with varying degrees of convincingness than of "actors" or "operators" whose influences might be more fleeting.

Street singing and noise

As hinted at with the scene presented at the very beginning of this article, I found regularly during my time in Wuhan in 2014 that *jiqing guangchang* events were attracting the unwanted attention of the local police. A few weeks earlier, six shows that used to cram side-by-side into one of Wuhan's riverside parks each afternoon were all moved on by the police

and forced to find new locations. I am told that this green space was the original place for *jiqing guangchang* performances when they first emerged in the city in the 1990s (Horlor 2019: 6) and that this intervention is part of a wider official inspection of informal stalls of various kinds across the city (Promoter Zhuang, online communication, 25 November 2014). Police sources explain in the local press that they are acting on complaints from residents about the loud music played at the events (Ju 2014), and that high numbers of spectators block thoroughfares and produce other "hidden dangers" (*anquan yinhuan*) in densely congested city spaces (*ibidem*).

Most *jiqing guangchang* shows in the city are run as straightforward business concerns, with organisers' cut of all the tips their singers receive from the audience acting as the incentive for them to provide the equipment, employ a band, and host the events. The head of one of the six recently displaced shows, however, operates her stage in collaboration with a local man in his early 60s who has suffered from paraplegia since an accident at work decades before (Hu and Zhang 2006; Zhang, Hu and Zou 2006; Xie 2008). On the day I first meet her, this 40-something-year-old woman, Ms Zhuang, modestly laughs off her role as being just that of a "sales promoter" (*cuxiao*) rather than that of the stage's boss. From then on, the moniker "Promoter Zhuang" becomes fixed in my mind. Her disabled collaborator began singing by himself on the streets a few years earlier when faced with bills for emergency medical treatment after his adopted daughter was diagnosed with a serious blood disease. He subsequently joined forces with Promoter Zhuang and they expanded to develop a fully fledged *jiqing guangchang* event, providing the stage for a number of regular singers. They present their show as an altruistic undertaking, displaying banners outlining the family's plight (Fig. 1) and providing a "benevolence post box" (*aixin xinxiang*) for people to leave money. Even so, Zhuang comes across to me as resigned and stoic about the police intervention; she and several others around these events repeatedly sum up the problem with

the shows as that they "disturb the public" (*raomin*). She acknowledges that the *Chengguan* (City Management, the public order branch of the local police) are simply implementing policies passed down to them from above (personal communication, 11 October 2014). Without an underworld background (*heishehui beijing*) or the ability to pay off (*maitong*) officials, a luxury that apparently other event organisers enjoy, she feels her position to be powerless (online communication, 25 November 2014).

[Figure 1 here]

Underlying the action of the authorities is clearly a genuine tension between street-music events and local residents. I observe several incidents in which the police come to events, conflicts flare up between individuals, and objects are thrown. Television news reporters investigate sound pollution on Wuhan's streets, and record levels at 20 metres from a square-dancing group as approximately 76dB. This falls only to 58dB when the reading is taken from the balcony of a ninth-floor apartment on the perimeter of the square, and both readings exceed the evening-hours maximum of 45dB stated in Chinese law (CCTV 2013a). Consistently coming away from a show after an hour or two feeling a little dizzied by the experience, though, what constitutes noise seems to me to involve more than loudness or any other acoustic quality taken in isolation. With events clustering closely in certain corners of the city, the cacophony of several clashing sources of music produces an "inharmonic interplay" (Wissmann 2014: 54–5) that strikes me as the most disturbing feature.

Sound and the city landscape

My interest here lies, however, less in the causes of these noise disputes, and in the political agendas surrounding them, than in their consequences. Police interventions mean that groups

are forced to move to new performance places in a range of quite dissimilar locations, and this variety opens up perspectives on how conditions of the environment are constitutive of the musical occasion. I hear that Promoter Zhuang and her collaborator, having lost their riverside park spot, are planning to try setting up their event in a new part of town, and I make sure to be present on the first day of the experiment. The rough area I am told to come to is unfamiliar to me; I find here a busy major road lined on one side by a grass verge, but no location as spacious as those in which groups usually choose to set up. As I begin making my way along the street, the area reminds me of a point emphasised in some of the foundational work of sound studies from the 1970s and 1980s: that a key characteristic of contemporary outdoor urban territory is the sonic domination of traffic sounds (Schafer 1977; Truax [1984] 2001). This feature of the soundscape is taken as a negative consequence of the technologies of modernity, and as indication that the phenomenon of people associating with each other in diverse ways is squeezed out of public hearing. Indeed, there are hints that this kind of agenda still has currency in more recent soundscape work (for example Zappatore 2018: 92–3). The traffic here certainly does drown out the reverberations of what could otherwise be perceived as a large acoustic space; it brings the "acoustic horizon" closer (Tagg 1994), in the sense that the traffic disrupts perception of sounds originating further away from the hearer and that the spatial range at which one can hear is reduced. Nonetheless, I eventually become aware of far-off low frequencies that sound musical, apparently low percussion and bass tones, and I find Promoter Zhuang's group inside five minutes of walking by following my ears.

Sharing territory with pervasive traffic sounds does not seem to hinder this particular example of what might be lauded as "grassroots" social activity from generating a sense of liveliness and loudness, something noted as an important phenomenon in Chinese social life. The word *re'nao*, literally "heat and noise," summarises the animation over which people are

said to bond in musical contexts (Jones 2013) and beyond (Chau 2008). The concept is certainly central to the discourses of *jiqing guangchang's* appeal that are transmitted as performers talk to crowds on the microphone between songs. I hear one emcee, for instance, introduce an evening session by stressing that the show is primarily aimed at those seeking *re'nao*, and that this orientation transcends other facets of individuals' identities:

> All are welcome to our party [*wanhui*] this evening! We want all lovers of *re'nao* to join in. Men and women, old and new friends, you are all welcome! There's no need to register [*dengji*]. Don't be afraid, this is a place for common happiness [*gongtong kuaile*]. (18 October 2014)

Navigating aurally to the performance this afternoon makes it clear to me that transmitting this sense of *re'nao* in the city surroundings depends on a synergy of the musical activity with the material conditions of the urban environment, including in the realm of sound. On the most basic level, the strong low-frequency grounding of the pop basslines and drum kits can be heard relatively well in an environment dominated by low-level background sounds such as traffic, and as full of obstacles to sound diffusion as a typical city space. Sound waves diffract around obstacles smaller than their wavelengths and thus the diffusion of lower-frequency sounds with longer wavelengths is hindered less. In other words, this music may have a relatively large range in the built-up environment (Truax: [1984] 2001: 150), and the phenomenon is tangible to me on this occasion as I rely on it to find my way to the show from a distance away.

The main element of this synergy between musical sounds and material conditions, though, relates to an observation about the high-pitched and nasal aesthetic central to the singing styles used in Chinese opera and folk genres. The development of this characteristic way of singing has been linked to the need for singers in these genres to project the voice to large crowds in times before electronic amplification (Chan 2005: 175–6). Many of the performers

considered to be among *jiqing guangchang's* most skilful employ a similar "ethnic" or "national" singing style (*minzu changfa*) as heard in these operatic and folk genres, favouring a piercing rather than a warm tone. On Wuhan's streets, my conversations with performers reveal that the skills to produce these singing styles are associated with high musical status. One who now identifies as a rock singer protests to me, not particularly convincingly, that a decade ago she used to sing in *minzu changfa* but that her throat is no longer up to producing the same purity of tone (A-jia, personal communication, 27 October 2014). Another ruefully tells me that her "ordinary" (*putong*) style is no match for this "specialist" (*zhuanye*) and "high-end" (*gaoduan*) style (Ganzi, personal communication, 9 October 2014). Most of the singers, however, still show its influences, preferring a nasal effect even when delivering pop songs recorded with the soft, breathy way of singing that has been equally familiar in the Chinese repertory since this style was popularised by the famous vocalist Deng Lijun in the late 1970s (Baranovitch 2003).

In *jiqing guangchang*, the shrill sung part soars above a backdrop that is mainly indistinct (apart from those lower-pitched drum and bass guitar sounds), with middle registers normally only minimally audible. A notable factor here is how music diffuses across space, and this requires considering the bands of the frequency spectrum into which each component sound falls. Loud sounds are likely to obscure softer ones that occupy a similar frequency range, and lower and mid-range sounds can have a masking effect over the register of frequencies immediately above them. Individual sounds from among several emitted simultaneously are thus more likely to be heard clearly when they are distributed in disparate frequency ranges (Truax: [1984] 2001: 81–2). It seems significant, then, that the music of *jiqing guangchang* combines the high-pitched and penetrating tone developed in operatic and folk singing with the low-frequency grounding of the bass and drum-heavy pop music sound world. This

polarised texture helps increase the range of audibility and with it perhaps the potential social impact of the *re'nao* projected into the city landscape.

Also significant in this equation is that in the centre of the city of Wuhan is the meeting point of China's longest river, the Yangtze, and one of its main tributaries, the Han. Three separate towns, Wuchang, Hanyang and Hankou, grew up and flourished at different spots on the banks of these two rivers at different times in history, and only in the twentieth century were they brought together under the amalgamated name of Wuhan. Historian of the nineteenth century William Rowe argues that these geographical facts were crucial to giving the three towns unusually strong senses of their distinct identities as places from early in their histories. In the case of Hankou, Rowe's main case study, ready-made competition with its neighbours bound together the newcomers who came from all over China from the fourteenth century onwards. Around this time, changes in the course and characteristics of the Han river opened up the potential for this spot to appear "virtually full-grown" as the key commercial port and thus the main economic hub city of the region (Rowe 1984: 27; 1989). In 2014, I find *jiqing guangchang* events in each of the three districts of the contemporary city, but significantly, most of them in clusters on or near to the Yangtze and Han riverbanks (Fig. 2).

[Figure 2 here]

The air currents around lakes, rivers and canals can become part of discourses of a place's unique acoustic characteristics. This is the case in the US city of New Orleans, for instance, where local musicians celebrate its "different kind of acoustics from other cities" (Danny Barker, quoted in Sakakeeny 2010: 4). These acoustics are said to allow the localised (and racialised) characteristics of individual district soundscapes to emerge over the general hum of the modern city. I have heard nothing comparable in Wuhan, but the water here

nonetheless seems significant in related ways. Sound has the potential to carry further across its rivers than through its typical city spaces, built up as they are with obstacles (*ibidem*). Other evenings, walking to the events that cluster on the nearest piece of land to the south of where the Han meets the Yangtze (see Fig. 2), I join flows of people crossing the bridge over the narrower river. The cacophonous sound of the four stages here is audible from the northern bank opposite, around ten minutes of walking before the stages even come into sight. The acoustic qualities of the singing being suited to outdoor urban conditions is, then, reinforced by the unique features of Wuhan's city landscape in the transmission of the *re'nao* that underpins the appeal of the shows. Wider physical geography becomes another factor in the synergy between the acoustic properties of the sound as a non-representational carrier of meaning and the physical conditions of its locations.

The performance venue

When I eventually arrive this afternoon at Promoter Zhuang's new experimental performance location with her displaced group, the situation is quite unlike that I knew in the old venue. The six shows were clearly established very firmly in the park before, with the dozens of people gathered around and between the stages dominating the area each day. Here in the new place, though, a team comprising the two organisers and only four singers (less than half the size of a more typical cohort) is singing on a section of that nondescript footpath next to a busy bus stop, and I watch it struggle hard for a few hours to maintain an audience large enough to outnumber itself. There is a contrast in the layout of the old and new venues, and these characteristics seem to play a role in shaping the qualities of the activity and their potential to thrive. Sally Harrison-Pepper's analysis of street performing in New York City's Washington Square Park links features of its design with patterns in its use (Harrison-Pepper [1990] 2010: 45). She notes how people are brought together into situations of potential

interaction by paths that meet and overlap, as opposed to in the city proper where activity is "separated and strung out along its streets" (*ibidem*: 64). I am reluctant to follow Harrison-Pepper in putting features such as these towards defining some spaces as those of "communitas" and others as spaces of "isolation" (*ibidem*: 63–4); to do so risks reducing these social phenomena to being simply about ease of physical encounter. In Wuhan, though, different physical layouts for performing do seem linked to different modes of listening and engaging with the shows, and in turn to significant consequences.

The previous performance space, the small park, has meandering paths and a variety of areas for sitting and for leisure (Fig. 3). It is less useful as a space of movement from one place to another since it does not link any two city points very directly, and it is evidently more commonly entered with the intention of lingering for recreation. At the spot near the bus stop, on the other hand, few uses for the space are apparent beyond facilitating people moving from one place to another, particularly since there is the grass verge and a few trees next to the road here rather than shops or other buildings around which people might stop or gather (Fig. 4). This is a place where most members of the public are in motion rather than inclined to linger.

[Figure 3 here]

[Figure 4 here]

But before linking the contrast between locations to the different experiences for Promoter Zhuang's group when performing in each, it is worth considering in a little more detail the kinds of sociality on which *jiqing guangchang* shows are built. Typically, there is a core of people in their audiences who develop habits of attending regularly and staying for several

hours or a full session. *Jiqing guangchang* is the only form of street music in Wuhan to routinely command any kind of substantial and dedicated audiences like these. In contrast, my experience with other street musicians – the guitar and voice buskers and Chinese classical and folk music instrumentalists – is that their audiences are of a transitory kind, and that they usually only briefly attract the attention of people passing by. At *jiqing guangchang* shows, encouraging people to linger in the space and to engage in sustained listening is the basis on which the relationships develop between performers and audience members, and it enables the emergence of the gift-giving that is fundamental to the experience. Singers pursue occasional large gifts from people they know rather than many smaller ones from passers-by as buskers tend to. Relationships of reciprocity can only develop through these sustained and repeated engagements (see Horlor 2019).

And it is because of these social orientations that significant consequences are linked to the kinds of behaviour associated with the new physical environment Promoter Zhuang and her group find themselves in today. Zhuang is aware of the kinds of sociality on which her success depends; she explains to me during the day's singing that it is people at leisure (*xiuxian*) rather than in transit (*liudong*) who give money (personal communication, 11 October 2014), and it is clear to us both that her group has not found many of the former here today. It means that it transparently fails to persuade those passing by of its claim on this territory, and normal life seems to carry on largely unaffected. In the park, people previously gathered in circles around the singers and effectively sealed off a stage area, giving the performance an enduring physical presence over several hours. This critical mass of people is never reached here, and pedestrians constantly walk through close to the singers, rather than feeling the need to go around their notional stage. A performing space is never properly established, and singers never have a static body of people towards which to orientate their singing.

Normally on Wuhan's streets, the stage space is hinted at by physical cues such as the placing of a small red mat roughly at the centre of the area around which an audience circle is expected to gather. Primarily, though, its definition relies on the social agreement of those nearby to form this loose circle of bodies and thus to define a zone within which anyone but performers is not ordinarily expected to enter or to linger. In these street-side contexts, setting up the equipment from scratch each day takes more than 30 minutes and is an important part of constructing an area understood as one for performance. Just as, for instance, pub musicians might go through a routine of tuning up, testing equipment, and giving introductions to try to command the attention of people for whom there are various competing claims (Mullen 1985), *jiqing guangchang* shows emerge gradually. Here, the first sonic impact upon the environment comes when some event helpers (rather than any of the designated singers) sing a few numbers in karaoke style, apparently not performing in the same way because their bodies are orientated towards the lyrics on the screen rather than out to an audience. This eventually merges into a designated singer taking over, and an audience circle starts to become recognisable. The singers work particularly hard in these early numbers to interact more than normal with the embryonic crowd during and between songs, regularly asking for applause and support, and giving short welcome speeches, as if trying to develop the audience's sense of itself (Polak 2007).

Used to performing under these circumstances, at one point during today's session in the new location, the sole male singer here is performing from the middle of the busy footpath. People constantly cross between him and where I and a handful of others are watching from the adjacent grass verge. Momentarily, an angry pedestrian squares up to him, his body language accusing the singer of blocking his path. This potential flashpoint does not develop into any more serious conflict and is over in seconds. The incident, however, is indicative of the singers' failure to engage an audience in the usual way and thus to define a performance

space. The session passes by with the highly unusual occurrence of almost no cash gifts being given, and this is the key factor in the group quickly realising the unsuitability of this new location and giving up performing there after only two days (online communication, Promoter Zhuang, 10 November 2014). Another one of the singers I meet for the first time this afternoon is apologetic and encourages me instead to go and see the place at which she and most of her colleagues today sing regularly in the evenings. Again she uses the word "*re'nao*" to sum up that show's advantage over today's disappointing experience (Zhu Lan, personal communication, 11 October 2014). I am in touch with Promoter Zhuang as she holds a dialogue with the authorities over subsequent weeks about suitable places to set up, and she even has meetings about hiring out private spaces. In the end, though, she decides to put her stage on hold, and in the meantime to join another group as a singer.

Definition of performance spaces

The street context in general contrasts with those of more formal musical performances in a crucial respect. In the latter, the privilege of singers to be listened to and for their activity to be received as legitimate performance may be granted quite routinely, following basic conventions of the genre. In fact, very often the whole *purpose* for people to come together is to make and listen to music. In some cultural contexts, this may be revealed even in the basic language surrounding musical activity; one of the two main Qawwali occasions in Indian Sufism noted by Regula Qureshi, for example, is the event called "gathering for listening" (1986: 107). But there is also increasing scholarly interest in contexts where audience roles and motivations may be less rigidly fixed by convention and language (Tsioulakis and Hytönen-Ng 2017). What can the experience at Wuhan's street shows add to understanding of this latter kind of context?

First, it is important to note that on the street in general, the privilege to be listened to is far from secure, and its establishment depends on performers' ability to gather and maintain a body of people prepared to engage in certain ways. The momentary clash between the male singer and the pedestrian points to these processes today being hindered by an ontological dispute over the definition of this footpath (Eisenberg 2013), one that brings to mind work on understanding the complex intersections that can exist between public and private modes of musical experience (Born 2013; Dueck 2013). The singer here understands the public footpath as a territory claimable as *his stage* – a space with some "private" characteristics within the wider public territory. Those passing by, on the other hand, clearly see him as illegitimately obstructing a stretch of ground that is reserved for the common good of enabling people to move around smoothly, a definition that naturally takes precedence over any minority claim.

That it is the pedestrians' definition of the space rather than the singer's that wins out, though, seems partly to result from the failure of one particular mechanism by which groups of people might establish more exclusive spheres of interaction within wider public contexts. To consider this mechanism, I turn to work from gesture theorist Adam Kendon that outlines so-called "F-formation systems." These are patterns of "spatial and orientational behaviour" that operate among groups of people when they interact in space (Kendon 1990: 212). In many situations, these systems construct and sustain a "joint transactional space" or "the space *between* interactants over which they agree to maintain joint jurisdiction and control" (*ibidem*: 211). F-formation systems, then, are the patterns of interaction that carve out, for instance, a small circle between the bodies of three people engaged in a standing conversation (this small circle being called the "o-space"). They are significant here because, as Kendon notes, they highlight the relationships between an interaction and the wider social world beyond it. In other words, the spaces established between participants effectively become

sealed off from the encroachment of people outside, and it often becomes socially inappropriate for non-participants to enter these spaces. Kendon explains that F-formation systems have a "framing or bounding function" and so offer an "excellent means of defining a social encounter as a unit for analysis" (*ibidem*: 209). In the street-music context, the systems of behaviour defining the singer's stage area as an entity and thus establishing the social presence of the performance in the urban environment (such as in the ideal case represented in Fig. 5) take on particular significances. They are crucial to the very viability of the performances, and hinge on the discussion above about different material conditions of different spots in the urban environment.

[Figure 5 here]

This is partly because not all locations for *jiqing guangchang* in Wuhan are quite like the improvised stages described so far. In one particular corner of Wuhan that is home to four stages operating each evening, *jiqing guangchang* shows have developed away from performances constructed each day on street corners towards those housed in permanent (albeit basic) structures and with more advanced equipment. These shows have fixed stages, sound systems and lighting, and defined audience areas with shelter and space for seating (see Fig. 6). Bringing into being a performance space and an audience here is, therefore, far more straightforward. It has more in common with the conventions of, for instance, a concert hall performance, where house lights might be dimmed and players might enter from a hidden area to indicate to a group of people already seated that the performance is beginning.

[Figure 6 here]

This layout focuses attention on the front from the beginning, with the organisers playing movies or television variety performances on large screens while the audience is gathering each evening, and then signalling the beginning of the main show as the playback ends and the event emcee enters the stage for an introduction, accompanied by music and flashing lights. People gathering in the area during these early phases of the show can hardly avoid forming an understanding that there will be a performance, and that the raised platform is an exclusive space reserved primarily for the musicians. Through investment in the material conditions of the shows, these stages have effectively lifted themselves out of the precarious reliance on F-formation systems to define space and legitimise their activities. There is no need for an o-space to be constructed for a stage area to be defined; this definition exists independently of the spatial behaviour of the audience, at least in the sense that the boundaries of the stage are identifiable even when no performance is going on.

The key contrast with the more usual street-side shows is that having fixed stages gathers and primes an audience for the show to begin abruptly, whereas establishing the space from scratch means a far more gradual process at the beginning (and indeed towards the end when the performance is deconstructed in steps too). Contrasting these two kinds of *jiqing guangchang* venue illustrates that the behaviour required to establish a definition of the situation as a performance (through forging a performance space) is highly dependent on the material circumstances of the places in which the performances happen. Establishing an o-space through F-formation systems of behaviour is a crucial mechanism by which performances assert themselves in public territory and temporarily define their stages. But the importance of these mechanisms is activated only in the particular material conditions of street-side music-making, when more enduring material impacts on the environment cannot be relied upon.

Performances as social experiences

So far, however, I have only partially explained how the specifics of the *jiqing guangchang* social occasion make these material dealings so significant. In fact, introducing a further contrasting example – with another form of street music in Wuhan – helps to isolate the specific social elements at play here. What does the contrast reveal about *jiqing guangchang* events as social happenings in which F-formation systems are so crucial as a mechanism for performance and urban environment to relate? One afternoon in 2014, I observe a man practicing the *dizi* (flute) on a city footpath. The man practices with backing music emitted by a small portable speaker; he plays along with the recorded track, which features a *dizi* part as well as the accompaniment. Sometimes he plays simultaneously with the *dizi* on the recording, and at other times he mimics its phrases at a slight delay. He clearly listens carefully to the recording and responds closely to what he hears. Significantly, the man chooses to position his speaker on one edge of the footpath, and he stands facing it on the other edge, a few metres away (Fig. 7). The width of the path is between the man and the speaker, so a steady flow of people walks through the space between them.

[Figure 7 here]

Imagining the man and his portable speaker to be the two "interactants" in this situation (as if in a conversation), then the sphere of which both are a part is certainly not impermeable to passers-by. Placing himself and his speaker at either side of the footpath means that others inevitably enter the physical domain within which his musical attention is focused, but he is unconcerned to keep this sphere inaccessible. In other words, he does not seem minded to create any kind of o-space to establish himself and his main counterpart in this musical

involvement, the speaker, in a sphere separate from other activity of the environment. This kind of street-music experience is not compromised in any way as a result.

If it is not necessary, then, for the *dizi* player to create this kind of space, then why does it matter so much for *jiqing guangchang* singers? Most obviously, perhaps, is that this man is not *performing* in the same sense that the *jiqing guangchang* singers are, but instead he is *practising*, acting is his own primary audience. Andrew Killick's way of understanding the appeal of this kind of solitary music-making is pertinent; he calls playing alone "a particularly satisfying way of marking out a space and a time of my own" (2006: 274). Even though the *dizi* player is not exactly solitary in this situation, the nature of his spatial and orientational behaviour is quite different from those involved in *jiqing guangchang* performances because of the contrasting nature of the "social" experiences. His primary concern, like Killick's, might be thought of as his own sense of space and time. This seems to exist independently of the collective definition that prevails over the footpath here, and the viability of his music-making does not depend on engaging people passing by or on shaping their behaviour in any way. In *jiqing guangchang* shows the opposite is true. Spatial and orientational behaviour, in tandem with the urban environment, is closely connected to a critical issue in this cultural context: the ability to establish legitimate performer identities.

Establishing legitimate performer identities

In their normal locations, including the small park from which Promoter Zhuang's group has been moved on, Wuhan's street singers enjoy a high status and are lauded publicly. On the microphone, event emcees routinely introduce singers with flattering designations such as "rock queen," and lavishly praise their performances at the end. With the final notes of one song, for instance, I hear an emcee hyperbolically mark the singer's "unique" achievement in embodying the unity of two schools in current Chinese music, the good-looking pop idols

(*ouxiang pai*) and the strong singers (*shili pai*) (24 October 2014). Likewise, backing musicians are "great masters" (*dashi*) and "fans" of the singers (*gemi*) hand over their cash tips in elaborate public displays of recognition, such as showering them with banknotes as if confetti. As I have already mentioned, at the experiment in the new location that Promoter Zhuang leads this afternoon, singers are ignored, disrespected, and occasionally confronted, and the contrast is stark.

Experiencing a difficult relationship with conditions of the urban environment, and thus unable to clearly define a space for legitimate performance, the singers today are reduced to a role closely aligned with more typical understandings of street performers in many contexts, and particularly in China. They join the ranks of those considered desperate and undesirable street nuisances. This cultural designation emerges strongly from Chinese-language articles on street performance from around the country and elsewhere. Luo Qin, whose doctoral thesis examines street music in Seattle, contrasts the established practice he finds in the US with that in China:

> The issue is that when "the street musician" is considered as a concept and a group of people, in China it is bound up with the concept of "making a living" [*shengji*] and even with "begging" [*qitao*], and what leaves an impression is street musicians' shoddy [*biejiao*] playing, their miserably poor life, and low status. (Luo 1998: 62)

Municipal authorities have been implicated in building and reinforcing this kind of suspicious attitude towards street musicians. In recent years in Beijing, for instance, it is reported that literature has been circulated to citizens to teach them how to identify "fakes," professional fraudsters out to make a living through presenting themselves as destitute (Jeffreys and Wang 2012: 582). Indeed, Wuhan's street performers repeatedly express concerns about being mistaken for beggars or fraudsters (Xie 2008; CCTV 2013b), and I notice that the city's buskers invariably display signs emphasising to the public their artistic

rather than monetary motivations: “Street music, working hard to realise a dream,” or “Doing my best for my dream.” They seem to hold similar motivation to singers elsewhere in the world who sell their CDs while they perform on the streets (Bywater 2006: 117). For those in *jiqing guangchang*, then, the stakes of successfully negotiating engagement with the material conditions of the urban environment are high. These negotiations can be pivotal in the very fundamentals of what they do, allowing them to establish identities as legitimate performers rather than as contemptible nuisances, and thus to make their living.

The urban environment and “social forces”

If the role of materiality in musical experiences has thus far been most extensively explored by ethnomusicologists with reference to instruments and other music artefacts such as records, or to the more general “soundscapes” of a wider city, the experiences of Promoter Zhuang’s *jiqing guangchang* group and a few other street musicians in Wuhan show that the conditions of the urban environment can also be a foundation of the very unfolding of a *performance* and of its related sociality. Developing existing interests in the short-lived impacts of non-human “actors” or “operators” towards thinking about enduring “conditions” raises the added connotation that performances are *conditional* upon the constraints, challenges, and opportunities associated with material realities. The spatial and orientational behaviour of *jiqing guangchang* participants has different effects depending on the characteristics of the urban environment in different places.

The practice in Wuhan in general harnesses a synergy between the acoustic make-up of the music performed, the sound environment of the contemporary city, and Wuhan’s unique geography. Looking more closely at individual venues, though, the ability to negotiate a variety of material conditions is the basis for establishing legitimate performance identities and for the money-based sociality characteristic of this form of street music. When the

impermanence of shows' material impacts on the environment demands it, F-formation systems of behaviour are a key mechanism. The specifics of venue layouts are also a factor, as the kinds of behaviour they enable influence whether F-formation systems have the potential to take hold. The environment is not a mere container or backdrop to this music, but it is *part* of what this music is, a pillar of the very viability of *jiqing guangchang* performance activities.

I have focused throughout the article less explicitly on relationships of power and on the involvement of music's spatialities in the initiation and reaffirmation of "boundaries of political affiliation" (Born 2013: 38). The proactive agency of the authorities in shaping how public territory is used in Wuhan certainly does loom large in this case study, most notably as *jiqing guangchang* groups are forced to adapt to new conditions when they are moved on from more favoured locations. A criticism of non-representational theory from some music geographers has been that, in emphasising bodies and other material in the unfolding of social activity, these approaches fail to take into account the power relations embedded in the values, histories, and numerous cultural factors that also shape relations between people (Revill 2004: 206; Saldanha 2005: 716). Other approaches, such as those in ecomusicology, seem more closely geared to these concerns. Among the interests of this scholarship is how people conceptualise and express their understandings of what shapes the aural world.

In the Chinese context, Helen Rees draws parallels with ecomusicology in her discussion of "original ecology folk songs," a recent craze for songs sung in "unvarnished local village style and dialect by local tradition-bearers" rather than those "artistically re-composed" and sung by highly trained urban singers (Rees 2016: 54). Rees argues that the popularity of these songs points to changes in how environmental issues are thought of in contemporary China, with the public displaying new perceptions of environmental degradation and "culture loss" that may be results of decades of rapid economic development (*ibidem*: 76). She also portrays

the trend as a response to urbanisation and modern lifestyles, linking it, for instance, to a "headlong rush to build identikit skyscrapers throughout the country [which] has resulted in the destruction of huge swathes of China's locally distinctive architectural heritage" (*ibidem*).

The original ecology idea has become ubiquitous in not only scholarly but also popular and commercial discourse, and with this, its meaning has become highly "elastic" (*ibidem*: 74). A wide variety of musicians, cultural institutions, and commercial enterprises seek to benefit from associating themselves or being associated with the notion, meaning that it now embraces not only unambiguously "original" musical material and environments but also practices showing "at best the vaguest of connections between a performance and some hazily imagined romantic cultural roots" (*ibidem*).

This development crystallises reasons that I hesitate to hold up points about politics and power as my main conclusions in this article. My concern is about the possibility when doing so of implicitly valorising the local over the universal, the old over the new, and the apparently democratic over the apparently hegemonic. A tempting conclusion in the present article might be that the experience of street musicians in Wuhan I have reported represents a defeat for grassroots cultural expression at the hands of larger forces. This inclination, however, can oversimplify and invite romanticised distortions of the kind emerging in relation to the notion of original ecology folk songs. Indeed, I noted above my impression that early work on soundscapes seems to begin from a nostalgic assumption that a traffic-free past is an ideal whose passing is to be mourned. The risk is of predictable orthodoxies emerging in scholarly conclusions when points about politics, power, and modernity are the destination.

Bruno Latour explains, though, that the actor network theory he harnesses contributes a means of overcoming a reliance on the notion of "social forces" when seeking to explain how the world works. Phenomena that Latour sees as problematically included in the realm of

social forces include “political context,” “social capital,” “individual agent,” and so on (*ibidem*); all of these, it must not be overlooked, are ideas that have no existence independent of the interpretations of those who invoke them. “Social forces” is a shorthand that Latour finds problematic because it implies the social to be made up of something more than moment-to-moment interactions between people. Latour calls it a “sleight of hand, a magical invocation” to suggest that these abstract forces operate to link face-to-face activity with a “far-reaching and durable” version of the social (Latour 2005: 65). Putting material and non-human factors closer to the centre of understanding how interpersonal activity plays out in the immediate sense is a way of scrutinising “what the social is made of,” understanding the mechanisms by which social connections are actually manifest (*ibidem*: 11).

The destination of this article, then, rather than being to show how abstract social or political forces shape the experience of street performing in Wuhan, is to explore the mechanisms in face-to-face activity by which these kinds of issues might have meaningful impacts. My interest lies not in directly or indirectly drawing attention to changes in Wuhan’s “grassroots culture” or in the characteristics of its public sphere, but instead in understanding on a microscopic level the processes by which effects that could be linked to those concerns are felt in actual experience. Seeing musical activity as a collaborative process involving humans and a wider world highlights the directness of the environment’s part in this activity and its decisiveness in the experiences of people involved.

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